



From Big Sandy to the Big Show

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

For many Texans, the attraction of this month's Super Bowl was not the actual football game. It wasn't even the buzz about the television ads. Instead, they were watching Texas's own Lovie Smith, head coach of the Chicago Bears, at work on the sideline.

Lovie may spend most of his time in Chicago now, but he'll always be a son of Big Sandy, Texas, population 1,350. He is noted for never forgetting the basic values he learned growing up in Upshur County, midway between Dallas and Tyler, in East Texas.

Born in Gladewater, Lovie Smith is a Texas classic—a life story grounded in the importance of family, friends, faith, small-town values—and, of course, football. It's a tale of one success after another, based on Smith's merit and character and drive. Even now, nationally recognized as a man of great accomplishments, Lovie Smith is the first to say how much he owes to his upbringing in Big Sandy.

In January, a media horde, including the Associated Press, descended on that town to report on a legendary high school football star and academic standout-turned professional football coach. That in itself is ironic, because friends and family agree that Lovie never consciously sought the spotlight, at any time.

Those who know him say Lovie's path to the Super Bowl began with a caring mother and father who instilled in him the importance of personal ethics, education, hard work, perseverance, self-reliance and loyalty.

His character and dedication in high school earned him not only a starring role on Big Sandy Wildcats state championship football teams, but membership in the National Honor Society and his classmates' recognition as "Most Likely to Succeed."

Lovie Smith moved on to Tulsa University and then to the big stage of professional football. But in one sense, Lovie Smith has never left Big Sandy. He goes home regularly, and still quietly supports projects that benefit the community. A new building for his childhood church, Brown's Chapel, was reportedly made possible in large part by the monthly tithes Lovie has sent his entire adult life.

And certainly Big Sandy has never forgotten Lovie Smith. As Lovie's cousin, Gary Chalk, told one newspaper: "It's actually Big Sandy out there on the sidelines. We're right there with him. When they dumped that water on him after the win against the Saints, we all got wet."

Some coaches, aiming only at wins and losses, become cut-throat and forget their humanity.

But Lovie Smith has a reputation for remembering the bigger picture, keeping faith with his players, and—as his mother taught him—treating people well.

One beneficiary of Lovie Smith's loyalty is the Bear's starting quarterback, Rex Grossman. At some points during the season, fans and critics called for Grossman to be benched. It never happened. Grossman says: "He wins because he sees the potential in his players and believes in us."

As a coach, Lovie Smith motivates his players to want to succeed, a style reminiscent of another native Texan, Tom Landry, whose quiet conviction and confidence also helped produce great football teams. Both Landry and Smith prove that success in sports and life can be accompanied by the genuine admiration, even love, of those they work with.

Tony Dungy, the Indianapolis Colts coach, paid a great tribute to Smith last month. Being a great coach does not require a win-at-all-costs attitude, Dungy said, nor does it require the sacrifice of what is truly important—such as family and faith. Lovie Smith and I both believe this, and "we aren't afraid to say it," Dungy said.

That's certainly the Lovie Smith they've always known in Big Sandy: humble, quiet and well-grounded.

A few years ago, Smith dropped by Big Sandy High School to pay his respects to the football coach. The secretary—also the coach's wife—didn't recognize the visitor or know he was coaching for the St. Louis Rams at the time.

She asked him if he wanted to leave a resume. Lovie didn't explain to her who he was, but instead said nothing. Several years later, he met the coach's wife again, and she told him how embarrassed she was about the incident.

Lovie Smith told her: "Don't you worry about that. You know how coaching is; you just hold onto that offer. I might need it one of these days."

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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